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ABSTRACT

Rapid societal changes in traditional male-female relationships partially explain current black male-female communication conflict; but first-generation black professional women face unique problems in maintaining effective communication in two subcultures. Data from a doctoral dissertation on black professional women's perceptions of their communication with black males suggested a strong influence of cultural conditioning on the participants' perceptions, goals, values, and communication strategies. Although most of these women had a positive image of the black male, they also indicated that the black male's ego was the primary cause of any communication problems. Although it was apparent that the black professional women faced unique communication problems in dyadic relationships with black males, no concrete evidence emerged from the study to suggest that such communication barriers would lead to the deterioration of black male-female relations. Effective communication between the black male and the black professional woman will require developing new communication strategies and tactics by both parties. Extensive demographic data is considered a valuable means of revealing what communication problems and what strategies for dealing with communication problems result from various cultural backgrounds. (RL)

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IS THERE A COMMUNICATION PROBLEM BETWEEN THE BLACK MALE AND THE BLACK PROFESSIONAL WOMAN?: A BLACK MALE PERSPECTIVE

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INTRODUCTION

Alice Walker points out that in folklore, the black woman has been identified as "the mule of the world," because she has "been handed the burdens that everyone else-everyone else-refused to carry." Walker further states:

> When we have pleaded for understanding, our character has been distorted; when we have asked for simple caring, we have been handed empty inspirational appellations, then stuck in the farthest corner. When we have asked for love, we have been given children.[1]

W.E.B. DuBois declared that "No other woman on earth could have emerged from the hell of force and temptation which engulfed and still surrounds Black women in America with half the modesty and womanliness that they retain."[2] The black woman's history in America is a testimony of her willingness to sacrifice her body, her pride, her goals, and her talents for the survival of the Black Family. When the black male has been unable to find adequate employment or any employment, to support his family, it has been the black woman, usually working as a domestic, who has kept bread on the table and a roof over the head of the Black family, while simultaneously fulfilling her role as mother

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[1]Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," in Southern Exposure, Volume IV, Number 4, p. 63.

[2]W.E.B. DuBois, Darkwater: Voice From Within the Veil (New York: Schocken Books, 1921), p. 185.

of her own family. Such sacrifices do not suggest that the black woman is a "superwoman," but rather one who places the love for her family above all else.

In her autobiography, Ossie Guffy concluded:

> Grandma didn't know she was strong. She just knew she had to do what she had to do, so she did it and found out it could be done. Grandpa didn't know he was weak. He just thought he couldn't do what he had to do, so what was the use of trying. Besides, Grandma always saw to it that, somehow, the family survived. Lots of Black people fall back on the comforting thought that the Lord will provide. To a black man, I suspect that the Lord is a black woman.[3]

Guffy's perception suggests what historically may be viewed as the nature of the black male-female relationship in America, due to the socioeconomic restraints on the black male. Therefore, it seems cruel and ironic that as more black women escape the confinements of domestic labor and squeeze their way into the slowly developing cracks in traditional and non-traditional female occupations, they often find that their "success" is detrimental to, rather than instrumental in, facilitating their communication with the black male. Black feminists, such as Michele Wallace, believe that Black males and females, are further apart today than they have ever been.

Objective

Using aspects of contemporary conflict theory as a tool for analysis, the objective of this paper will be to

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[3]Ossie Guffy, Ossie: The Autobiography of a Black Woman, as told to Caryl Ledner (New York: Bantam Books), 1971, p. 3.

provide a black male perception of the current state of communication between the black male and the black professional woman. The position taken in this paper will be supported by data from the author's doctoral dissertation study entitled: THE DENVER, COLORADO AREA BLACK PROFESSIONAL/BUSINESSWOMAN'S PERCEPTION OF HER COMMUNICATION WITH THE BLACK MALE. This paper will be limited to a brief analysis of the participants' self-perception and the effect of the black male's ego on communication between the black professional woman and the black male.

An Overview of the Dissertation Study

The study consisted of taped interviews of approximately one hour in length. These interviews were centered around a series of open-ended questions. Fifty Denver, Colorado area black professional/businesswomen participated in the study. The fifty participants represented forty different occupations. Forty-six percent of the participants were married, four percent were separated, twenty-four percent were divorced, and twenty-six percent were single. The participants' median educational level was approximately 19 years. Sixty-two percent of the participants' had annual salaries between $10-15,000.

Among other things, the study sought to ascertain the participants' self-perception and their perception of the areas in which communication problems with the black male would most likely occur. All of the participants perceived

themselves as having a very positive self concept. The participants identified four major potential problem areas: The black male ego, the white female, financial matters, and differences of goals and values.

The Participants' Self-Perceptions

All of the participants had very positive self-concepts. These perceptions were strongest in matters related to their perception of their job performance, potential for advancement, and feeling good about themselves as a person. All of the participants perceived themselves as being intelligent and physically attractive. Ninety-four percent of the participants perceived themselves as being assertive. Six percent felt that they were aggressive. Ninety-four percent of the participants also preferred to be recognized as a woman in a social situation rather than as a professional person. These women stated that their femininity was important and that they enjoyed being "treated like a lady," and felt that such treatment in no way subtracted from their professional qualifications. The six percent of the participants who wanted to be recognized as professionals (these were not the same six percent who felt that they were aggressive) felt that their feminine qualities were obvious; they wanted everyone to know that their positive qualities extended beyond their physical appearance. Professionally, all of the participants perceived themselves as being above

average in their profession. Seventy-eight percent of the fifty had plans for achieving goals beyond their current professional level. The majority of the participants stated that they were always looking for new opportunities for career advancement and were quick to take advantage of such opportunities when they were available.

The Participants' Perception of the Black Male's Ego

Eighty-six percent of the participants had a positive image of the black male. However, almost all of the participants stated that the black male's ego was the number one item which caused communication problems in a male-female dyadic relationship. The black male's ego was perceived as being his "pride" and/or his perception of "the male role" in a male-female relationship. The participants perceived the ego as being both positive and negative depending on whether it was the motivation for a positive self-concept or the rationale for "running a game" or attempting to "control" the black female.

Almost all of the divorced women stated that their marriages had been affected by their ex-husband's ego. The divorcees pointed out that there was often a difference in their perception and their ex-husband's perception of the roles in their relationship. The indications were that the ex-husband felt that as "the man" of the house he had or should have had privileges that the wife did not have. He determined what was right for both of them. Most of the

divorced women claimed that their ex-husband had a difficult time admitting when he was wrong.

Married women, also, indicated that their husband's ego was a major problem in their communication. Their situations were different, however, since most of them had developed methods of coping with the problem. One married woman commented: "I really don't pay him any attention. I let him rage until he gets it off his chest and then I can deal with him." Another commented: "He needs to feel like he is in control to feel like a man, so I let him." Although the majority of the married women had learned to cope with their husband's egos, they also indicated that such a compromise meant that they were placing their intelligence and abilities in the background in order to keep peace in the home. One married woman who was about to complete her Ph.D., said that she had talked it over with her husband, who has a B.A., to find out how he felt they should be addressed in public when she received her degree. His response was: "Mr. and Mrs. will be fine."

The black male's ego was a special problem for a majority of the single women since most of them had not "found anybody." However, the majority of the single women were not willing to submit to the will of a man who was not perceived as having a good self-concept. The single women appeared to have the most pride and were less willing to compromise than the married or divorced women. One single woman commented:

"I don't plan to put myself through a bunch of changes for any man." Most of the single women appeared to be searching for the ideal black male who had a good self-concept and would allow them the same rights and privileges he had. There was a general agreement among the single and divorced women that they did not have the slightest idea where to start looking for such a man.

The majority of the participants suggested that the black males which they came in contact with indicated a need to feel that they were in control of the relationship and were not overshadowed by the female. This appeared to create problems in matters relating to differences in the couples' income and job status. One married woman who was highly skilled in a rare technical field, stated that she was only allowed to work part time so that she would not make more money than her husband, who was an engineer. Another married woman commented that the most difficult time during their marriage had been a two-year period in which her husband had been unemployed and she had supported the family. Another married woman who had two masters degrees, plus thirty six additional credit hours, stated that she had not pursued a Ph.D. because her husband's ego would not be able to tolorate it.

The married women who had developed coping skills to hold their marriages together admitted that it was usually a choice between their marriage and their personal goals

and ambitions. Their coping often included "playing dumb" and not questioning actions taken by their husband when it was obvious that his actions were inappropriate. The majority of the divorcees had not been able to accept and/or master these coping skills. Several women who were divorced admitted they could not stand by silently and watch things happen that were not beneficial to the relationship and/or the family without expressing their disapproval. These responses were often met with comments such as: "You think you're so damn smart! Nobody can tell you anything."

Several of the divorced and single women admitted they had started trying to avoid mentioning their occupation as long as possible when they met a black male for the first time. This tactic was an attempt to let the black male get to know her as a person before stereotyping or making generalizations about her based on her occupation. Women in management and engineering felt a strong bias because of their careers. Both single and married women mentioned having men "back off" from them once their occupation was known. One divorcee stated that she was rejected by a black male who, after learning her occupation, stated that he was not looking for an intellectual challenge just a good male-female relationship. All of the women interviewed agreed that there is a definite shortage of "desirable eligible black males."

Is There a Problem?

Eighty-six percent of the participants in the study had a positive perception of the black male. All of the participants expressed a desire to have "a meaningful relationship" with a black male. However, these positive factors did not eliminate communication conflict. Frost and Wilmot define conflict as being:

> An expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties, who perceive incompatible goals, sacred rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals. They are in a position of opposition in conjunction with cooperation.[4]

Miller and Simon point out that conflict is not easily defined, nor is it easy to differentiate conflict from related terms such as "hostility," "disagreement," "incompatibility," "competition," and "misunderstanding."[5]

While Frost and Wilmot's definition of conflict seems to describe the status of current communication between the black male and the black professional woman, the term conflict was seldom used by the participants in the study to describe the state of their communication with the black male. Crosby

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[4]Joyce Hocker Frost and William W. Wilmot, Interpersonal Conflict, (Dubuque, Ia.: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1978), p. 9.

[5]Gerald R. Miller and Herbert W. Simons, Perspectives on Communication in Social Conflict, Sponsored by Speech Communication Association, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1974), p. 7.

points out:

> There is a popular societal taboo aganist conflict, particularly marital conflict. The taboo is not explicit; it is implicit. The word conflict conjures up negative connotations due to our historical view that conflict is morally wrong.[6]

This perception was verfied in "The Historical Overview of Black Male-Female Relations" in the dissertation study.

Crosby further declares:

> A cultural tradition which, for whatever historically conditioned reasons, considers conflict morally wrong will encourage the suppression and repression of conflict thus laying a foundation for misunderstanding resentment, anger, hostility, hatred, and misplaced aggression.[7]

These manifestations of black male-female conflict form the nucleus of the literature and rhetoric of the black feminist.

While the participants' perception of the difficulties of establishing and/or maintaining a meaningful dyadic relationship with a black male suggest the degree of communication conflict which exists between the black male and the black professional woman, what may be of greater significance than the verification that the conflict exists, is insight into its probable causes and resolution.

The analysis of the data from the study suggests that many of the participants were not cognizant of the potential

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[6]John F. Crosby, "Conflict Resolution: An Entree into the Self," in Process in Relationship by Edward A. Powers and Mary W. Lees, (St. Paul: West Pub. Co., 1974), p. 128.

[7]Ibid.

impact of the structure of the conflict on its outcome nor had they developed the strategies and tactics needed for resolving their conflicts with the black male. Divorced and single women indicated that they were unaware of or understimated their potential to structure and influence their communication conflict with the black male. The married women, who admitted developing "coping skills," were more cognizant of their ability to influence conflict structure, however, the majority of the married women appeared to be conservative in the exercise of their potential power.

The single and divorced women's perception of being limited in determining the structure of their communication conflict may have been partially due to the belief that they had few choices which would not intensify the conflict and possibly contribute to the termination of the relationship. Frost and Wilmot claim that "the selection of your choices leads to uncertain outcomes. You make moves without full awareness of the structure of the conflict."[8] The perceived shortage of "eligible, desirable, black males" may have been a further deterrent to the participants asserting themselves and feeling that they had several choices in determining and/or influencing the structure of their communication conflict. Although the married women had mates, several married women expressed concern

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[8]Frost and Wilmot, p. 73.

about being too assertive in conflict and possibly "driving" their husbands to other women.

The possibility of severe penalties for making unacceptable choices in attempting to structure their communication conflict with black males appears to have been a major concern for the majority of the participants. Such restrictions suggest that the black professional women in all three marital categories may tend to choose a "low hassle" strategy to avoid the possibility of making the "wrong choice" in structuring their conflict with the black male, thereby injuring his ego and affecting their ability to communicate and/or destroy their relationship.

In addition to not having developed effective strategies and tactics for resolving their conflict with the black male, the participants also indicated conflicts in goals and values. The majority of black males were perceived as being preoccupied with cars, fashionable clothing, their male image, and related items which might affect their social image. Single women perceived most black males as simply being interested in "having a good time." Divorced women perceived black males as lacking drive and ambition. These preconceived differences in goals and values have the potential of not only determining the type of communication conflict that will occur between the black male and female, but also the structuring of the conflict.

The majority of the participants were unable to clearly articulate their goals and values in anything other than general descriptions. According to Frost and Wilmot, "even when people say what they want, they neglect the 'how do we get there' part of the statement."[9] suggesting that the fulfillment of one's goals requires not only clearly defined goals, but also a definite plan of action.

Structuring the conflict, having clear goals and values, developing strategies and tactics, and effective use of power are all means to the same end, conflict resolution. Problem solving is normally dependent upon acquiring a clear understanding of the conditions which created the problem, a desire to resolve the conflict, and acceptable strategies and tactics by which the conflict can be resolved.

Miller and Simons argue that "some apparent conflicts turn out to be pseudo-conflicts," claiming that "with a bit of dialogue, it is discovered that there is no real incompatibility or interest."[10] While the data from this study is not sufficient to ascertain the percentage of the participants' conflicts which may be classified as pseudo-conflicts, some of the perceived conflicts may be more appropriately classified under the pseudo-conflict heading.

This study suggests the strong influence of cultural

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[9]Frost and Wilmot, pp. 86-87.

[10]Miller and Simons, p. 178.

conditioning of the participants' perceptions, goals, values, and communication strategies. It was clear that the black professional woman still perceives the black male as being the "head" of the family and expresses no desire to take over this function. The study further implies that extensive demographic data provides a valuable means of revealing subcultural differences which may be critical to the selection of communication strategies and predicting the types of communication problems of black professional women from various subcultural backgrounds.

There are also indications that first generation black professional women face unique problems in maintaining effective communication in two subcultures while developing new communication strategies to communicate effectively with males in their new professional environment and those in their former environment. Such individual problems underscore the importance of avoiding broad generalizations about black professional women and perceiving them as individuals who are members of a racial/cultural group rather than as an indistinguishable part of their racial/cultural/occupational group.

While it is apparent that the black professional woman faces unique communication problems in her dyadic relationship with the black male, this study produced no concrete

evidence that such communication barriers will lead to the deterioration of black male-female relations. However, it is clear that effective communication between the black male and the black professional woman will require the development of new communication strategies and tactics by both parties. It is also clear that the implementation of new communication strategies necessitates a re-examination of the black male and female roles in a dyadic relationship.

Jean Noble believes that the American family is undergoing revolutionary change. She comments:

> The term 'head of the family' is passe' as a Model-T Ford. In the past this term meant that all final decisions were made by the man. It often meant that the man's needs were placed ahead of those of his wife. Today many couples reject this family model, though some still think black men need to be authoritarian.[11]

It is this emerging dual perception, the modern versus the traditional, which is being challenged by societal changes and the increasing number of black professional women.

While the long range effect of a given change may be positive, its initial influence may be negative. Beals points out:

> Whenever individuals encounter new situations, the possibility arises that the solution which they apply to the problem will be improper, that it will offend and annoy others instead of drawing their approval.[12]

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[11]Jeanne Noble, Beautiful, Also, Are the Souls of My Black Sisters: A History of the Black Woman in America (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), pp. 336.

[12]Alan R. Beals, Culture in Progress (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1967), pp. 117.

Beals' analysis suggests an explanation for the current black male-female communication conflict resulting from rapid societal changes in the traditional male-female relationship. Understanding and developing effective communication strategies to cope with these changes will strengthen and preserve effective communication between the black professional woman and the black male.